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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000545

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/MAG (HOPKINS AND HARRIS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/29/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PDP PARTY LEADERS: TUNISIANS DESERVE  
MORE POLITICAL FREEDOM

REF: TUNIS 493

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: LEADERS OF THE INDEPENDENT OPPOSITION PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATIC PARTY (PDP) LAMENTED THE COMPLETE POLITICAL "BLOCKAGE" IN TUNISIA IN A MEETING WITH THE AMBASSADOR ON APRIL 26. PDP LEADERS, SAID THAT A MOVE TO ATTRACT NEW MEMBERS AND RAISE ITS PROFILE DOMESTICALLY HAS BEEN MET WITH INCREASED GOT HARASSMENT. PDP THANKED THE AMBASSADOR AND THE USG FOR SUPPORT OF DEMOCRATIC REFORM, AND ENCOURAGED FURTHER PUBLIC STATEMENTS AND ACTIONS TO THIS END. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) AMBASSADOR PAID A COURTESY CALL ON MAYA JRIBI, PDP SECRETARY GENERAL AND RACHID KHACHANA, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF OF PDP

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WEEKLY NEWSPAPER AL-MAWQIF, ON APRIL 26 AT PDP'S TUNIS HEADQUARTERS. THE MEETING CAME AS THE PDP FACED A APRIL 28 DEADLINE FROM ITS LANDLORD TO SUSPEND POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AT THEIR HEADQUARTERS OR FACE EVICTION. (NOTE: PDP ALLEGED THE GOT WAS BEHIND THE LANDLORD'S DEMANDS. AS OF MAY 1, PDP WAS STILL CONDUCTING ACTIVITIES AS NORMAL IN THEIR HEADQUARTERS. REF A. END NOTE.)

"COMPLETE BLOCKAGE"

¶3. (C) DURING AN HOUR-LONG MEETING, JRIBI AND KHACHANA DETAILED HOW THE RULING DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTIONAL RALLY (RCD) PARTY CONTINUES TO MAINTAIN A "COMPLETE BLOCKAGE" OF THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN TUNISIA. JRIBI SAID THAT THE HANDFUL OF INDEPENDENT OPPOSITION ASSOCIATIONS, AND THE TWO INDEPENDENT OPPOSITION PARTIES (PDP AND THE DEMOCRATIC FORUM FOR LIBERTIES AND LABOR - FDTL) SUFFER FROM NEAR CONSTANT GOT HARASSMENT AND OPPRESSION. WHILE NOTING TUNISIA'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROGRESS, JRIBI CAUTIONED THAT DEVELOPMENT IN THESE AREAS HAD SLOWED TO A STANDSTILL, SINCE PROGRESS WAS "DIRECTLY RELATED TO HOW POLITICALLY OPEN TUNISIA IS." RESPONDING TO A QUESTION FROM THE AMBASSADOR ABOUT THE "DEMOCRATIC PLAN" OFTEN CITED BY GOT INTERLOCUTORS, KHACHANA INTERJECTED THAT THE PLAN WAS NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF A BROAD-BASE OF TUNISIANS, BUT RATHER A FEW RCD ELITE. PERHAPS MOST WORRYING, JRIBI CONTINUED, IS THAT "THERE IS NO OUTLET FOR YOUTH" -- YOUNG TUNISIANS HAVE TWO CHOICES FOR POLITICAL EXPRESSION: EMIGRATION OR EXTREMISM.

PDP EXPANDS ITS REACH

¶4. (C) JRIBI SAID THAT DESPITE THE "SUFFOCATING" POLITICAL ATMOSPHERE, PDP HAS RAISED ITS PROFILE, AND MORE TUNISIANS HAVE EXPRESSED INTEREST IN THE PARTY'S ACTIVITIES. JRIBI SAID THIS INCLUDED NEW YOUTH MEMBERSHIP, AND WOMEN -- A

DEMOGRAPHIC THAT JRIBI, THE FIRST FEMALE POLITICAL PARTY HEAD IN TUNISIA, WAS PARTICULARLY INTERESTED IN ATTRACTING. KHACHANA SAID THAT THIS RENEWED INTEREST IN THE PARTYS ACTIVITIES WAS REFLECTED IN THE NUMBER OF TUNISIANS SEEKING OUT AND READING AL-MAWQIF, WHICH HE SAID HAD INCREASED ITS CIRCULATION FROM 8,000 TO 10,000 COPIES EACH WEEK.

USG CAN HELP OPPOSITION WITH PUBLIC STATEMENTS  
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15. (C) WHEN AMBASSADOR ASKED HOW THE USG COULD ASSIST PDP, KHACHANA RESPONDED THAT PUBLIC STATEMENTS SUPPORTING OPPOSITION AND INDEPENDENT CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS AND/OR CONDEMNING GOT HARRASSMENT SENT STRONG SIGNALS OF ENCOURAGEMENT AND "MORAL SUPPORT" TO THESE GROUPS. TURNING TO US POLICY, KHACHANA AND JRIBI BOTH EMPHASIZED THE NEED FOR THE UNITED STATES TO WITHDRAW FROM IRAQ, NOTING THAT WHILE SUNNI/SHI'A TENSION EXPLAINED PART OF THE CURRENT CONFLICT IN IRAQ, MUCH OF THE INSTABILITY WAS FUELED BY REACTIONS TO THE CONTINUED US PRESENCE. AMBASSADOR RESPONDED BY EXPLAINING IN DETAIL THAT THE ELECTED LEADERS OF IRAQ HAD ASKED FOR A CONTINUED COALITION MILITARY PRESENCE AND UNDERSCORING THE IMPORTANCE OF REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR THE EFFORT IN IRAQ.

COMMENT  
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16. (C) JRIBI AND KHACHANA, ARTICULATE AND ELOQUENT THROUGHOUT THE MEETING, CLEARLY DEMONSTRATED THE DYNAMISM AND RESPECT FOR INTELLECTUAL, OPEN DEBATE THAT IS OFTEN MISSING IN MEETINGS WITH GOT LOYALISTS. WHILE THE GOT FILLS MOST OF ITS MINISTERIAL AND BUREAUCRATIC RANKS WITH RCD FUNCTIONARIES WHO STICK TO STANDARD GOT TALKING POINTS, INDEPENDENT, VIBRANT TUNISIANS SUCH AS JRIBI AND KHACHANA ARE FORCED TO SEEK WHAT POLITICAL SPACE AND INFLUENCE THEY CAN IN THE RANKS OF THE MARGINALIZED OPPOSITION PARTIES. WHILE PDP MAY HAVE

RAISED ITS PROFILE SOMEWHAT, IT STILL FACES MEDIA RESTRICTIONS THAT WILL PREVENT IT FROM GETTING ITS MESSAGE TO THE GREATER TUNISIAN POPULACE.

BIO NOTE:  
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17. (U) JRIBI IS THE DIRECTOR OF THE EL AMOURI INSTITUTE, A FIRM SPECIALIZING IN MARKETING RESEARCH AND HUMAN RESOURCES CONSULTING.  
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